On Campus

Freedom on Their Minds

Professor Manning Marable launches a new Web-based teaching resource on African American history.

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Elizabeth Eckford was one of nine black students to enroll at Little Rock Central High School in 1957. Protesters threatened her with lynching and blocked her from entering, so she retired to a bench nearby. "A white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me, and patted my shoulder," Eckford later told an interviewer. "He said, 'Don't let them see you cry.'" The photo is part of the Amistad Digital Resource. (Will Counts Collection / Indiana University Archives)

History textbooks teach that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks sparked the conscience of America by leading the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. But the true heroes of that 400-day protest against racist transportation policies were the "thousands of average black people" who took part in the boycott, says Manning Marable, a Columbia professor of history, political science, and public affairs.

The notion that ordinary black Americans in the civil-rights-era South were dedicated activists, not simply victims, is at the heart of a new Web-based teaching resource that Marable has developed for high schools. "The Amistad Digital Resource for Teachers," which Marable soon will release in collaboration with the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC), is an online archive of visual and audio materials documenting the experiences of relatively unknown figures. The content covers the period from 1954 to 1975 and is based on Marable's 2003 book *Freedom on My Mind: The Columbia Documentary History of the African American Experience*.

"It makes history come alive," said Marable, who has tested the product in focus groups. "There's a real 'wow' factor, and teachers love it."

Starting in December, high school teachers across the country will have free access to www.amistadresource.org, where they can download maps of civil-rights riots and demonstrations, FBI documents, rare photos and film clips, personal correspondence, oral history interviews, and songs that chronicle the civil-rights and black-power movements. In a chapter about the bus boycott, for instance, students can read a letter from a local black women's group informing the mayor of Montgomery of its members' plan to walk to work.

"Most kids learn that Rosa Parks sat down on the bus because she was exhausted," said Kate Wittenberg, director of EPIC. "But it was an extremely well organized movement, all planned out, preceded by letters to politicians. The primary sources tell the real story."

Public schools in New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and Florida today require extensive teaching about black history, and Marable says the Amistad project will provide their teachers new lesson ideas, as well as links to historical societies, libraries, and museums. "Most history and social science instructors," he says, "have never taken related courses and are not trained or sufficiently knowledgeable to teach black history."

Marable and Wittenberg are sending out national mailings to superintendents' groups and district leaders to encourage them to use the Web site. "The technology is there to support the content, scholarship, and teaching," according to Wittenberg, who said the digital resource is not meant to replace textbooks, but to supplement them.

The Ford Foundation provided a $91,000 grant to create the product prototype, and EPIC now is seeking an additional $2.5 million in private funding to expand the content to cover four centuries of African American history. The Web site is being built by Columbia's Center for Digital Research and Scholarship. It draws from Columbia University archives and Marable's own research, among other sources.

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